

SHAKESPEARE AND THE NORMAL WORLD

I

THE CENTER OF PROBABILITY

BISHOP BUTLER remarks that probability is the very guide of life. He knew that in human life there is almost nothing rarer than certainty. The farthest extension of probability is called proof, but proof is possible only in one area of human thought, the area of mathematics and experimental science. It may of course be said that outside of the experimental sciences high degrees of probability may be arrived at in some of the social sciences where it is possible to use the statistical method and limited forms of experimentation. The whole world in which man lives has only probability as its guide and reason as its agent. Wisdom is the ability to judge soundly and deal sagaciously with knowledge as it relates to human life and conduct. Solomon says that wisdom is more precious than rubies. It is pretty obvious that in order to come to an understanding of life the field must not be limited and the thinking mind must not be narrowed. Nothing less than the broad and frank consideration of the whole field of our lives will yield what we call wisdom. The system of record enables us to use, not only the wisdom of our own world, but the wisdom of ages. And out of this arises an occasion for our continued and continual study of Shakespeare, for Shakespeare, more than any writer, ancient or modern, whose works have been pre-

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served, has presented us a normal, inclusive, interpreted picture of man on earth. The whole of human life is not in Shakespeare, but what is there seems to be part and parcel of the thing itself. Another and more formal way of saying what I have said, although at first it may not seem so, is to say that Shakespeare established a type form of Elizabethan drama. His earlier contemporaries, such as Marlowe, Greene, and Heywood, were also untrammelled in their consideration of human life, but they lacked Shakespeare's penetrating insight, his breadth and his artistic power, so that it was left for Shakespeare to develop drama into an inclusive and revealing picture of human life as we believe it actually is. In other words, Shakespeare was the Bacon of literature. He was as great a discoverer and analyst in the field of human life and its relations as Bacon was in the field of natural sciences.

Now, what happens, we may ask, when writers and audiences content themselves with something less than the whole? When writers adopt definite theories about the nature of man and his existence and the audience appealed to is not a representative cross-section but only a single class or segment of society? In such a case we have something less than a convincing probability. Let us grant, to begin with, that this is not primarily a question of artistic skill or of interest. It is merely a matter of the whole truth as against a part of the truth or a falsification. One thing that writers and their readers do in pursuit of such restricted revelations is to think of the world as better and happier than it is. They build themselves ivory towers, and literature becomes a means of escape.

Another thing they do is to conceive of the world as worse than it is when judged according to the best opinions of human creatures dead and alive. Why they do this is, more

or less, their concern. Their own experience including their health and their inheritance makes them see the world as an affair of tooth and claw, let us say, or an affair of ignorance, illness, filth, vice, and sin. Out of it they get the satisfaction of the satirist, the advocate, or the revealer of ignored yet palpable aspects of truth.

One of these typical worlds might be described as too good and the other as too bad; the one superficial, the other submerged in a deep dark sea of sordid detail. But there is another which we like to think, with perhaps a proper warrant, is the normal, ordinary attitude of both writers and readers, according to which a place is found for the variety and complexity of life on earth. This we might describe as the acceptance of the ordinary. Of course there is much of the extraordinary within the ordinary and this must be accepted too. I recall that as a student I heard Woodrow Wilson explain and defend a definition of genius as the possession of ordinary powers to an extraordinary degree. So that the ordinary is not to be thought of as uninteresting, although I am aware that both by old and young it is habitually so regarded. It might be put this way in the form of a question: are you willing to accept yourself as your portion, your family as a human family, your community as a civilized community, your church as a true church, and to remain on friendly terms with yourself, your family, your community, and your church, neither idolizing nor condemning your environment, for these things make up a large part of your environment?

If this be your attitude, you will have the attitude of Shakespeare. His great later contemporaries all deserted his quite general position, and all devoted their undoubtedly magnificent powers to special aspects of the field of human life for the sake of giving pleasure to special sections of

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society. Marston and Jonson went in for satire; Tourneur and Webster for the psychology of terror; Middleton and Ford for abnormal relations in society. And, as we say, the art form degenerated. But it was not artistic skill in the writing of drama which degenerated; it was the truth and the breadth of the appeal to our best sense of probability. It must be said that Shakespeare had gone about as far on the open road as a man could go, and that it was almost necessary for his successors to resort, like Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, to Bypath Meadow.

This can be best understood by a consideration of Shakespeare's relation to tragedy. Tragedy may be said to depict the struggle of man against his environment. Ever since the first primate raised a hand to pluck his food or to resist his enemies man has been engaged in this struggle. Although the devices of prudence may have enabled him to shield his offspring against the world or make it possible for them to whistle idly and securely while the world goes by, the exemption has never become complete. Although defenses against the external forces of cruelty and competition may be built, they are still insecure, and, especially, no adequate protection has been found against those enemies which reside within the bosom of every man, those sins of omission and commission from which we pray to be delivered. Participation in the conflict or liability to suffer from it through nonparticipation may be said to be ever present to all men. Every man is in some degree affected and any man may be sternly called to battle. Hamlet, happy and favored in youth, that loyal son, that Wittenberg humanist, that "glass of fashion and the mould of form," "the observ'd of all observers," is put to the test, and it is notable that his disgust at life is his first and greatest enemy. We merely ask, "How does he meet the test?"

Shakespearean tragedy rests on the conception that we live in a world hung in chains over chaos. It teaches that life is at best a painful effort, a struggle with nature, even with nature within oneself. Nature has a purpose and laws, but they do not include our happiness or seem to be our purpose and laws. Tragedy reveals in man an inherent passion for justice, but it does not say that justice prevails. On the contrary, man must prostrate himself before the unknown, for there is evil not of man's making abroad in the world. Chance and accident take a hand in the game. Even character is a minor matter, since the likenesses of men are far greater than their differences. "Such things happened to him; they may happen to me," we say. In the larger sense calamity includes and obliterates deserving. Character itself is an accident of fate. To be sure, Shakespeare uses accident and fate but sparingly, and yet Friar John is held up by the quarantine on his way to Mantua and fate makes on the admirable Cordelia the one demand she could not satisfy.

It is obvious that evil is the disturber of the order of the world, is the main source of convulsion. The primordial power of God is creation, and with creation redemption is associated from the beginning. Evil is negation and destruction. It is abnormal and ultimately self-destroying, but the eradication of evil is inevitable and often carries destruction of the good along with the bad. It is an application of God's eternal method of trial and error. Iago's creed is absolute egotism. He has a superiority complex which makes him entertain a cold contempt for the world. He demands satisfaction for his sense of power. His *amour propre* has been affronted, and he tries to make egotism and inhumanity prevail; but he is destroyed by love, the very earthly power whose existence he had denied. He made no allowance for

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the fact that Emilia loved her mistress. *King Lear* stages a conflict in the world between the powers of good and evil on a scale so vast that it defies imagination. Life in the world is prey to offensiveness, and the tragic issue arises out of environment. Galsworthy describes the situation thus: "Mystery enwraps the cause, the origin, the end of life, yea, even of human life. And the acceptance of that mystery brings a certain dignity to existence."

Our revolt is the measure of our souls, and man becomes noble only by resisting. From the heart of failure tragedy plucks the conviction that human beings are greater than they know. Tragedy solves nothing, but it gives a newborn vision. Passion reveals in its heated mood reaches of the human spirit which go beyond the scope of science. Macbeth, who identifies himself with evil, destroys the world and yet is man enough to confront the destruction he has wrought. There is no spectacle so appalling as the conviction that life is an affair of absolute inconsequence, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," and yet Macbeth grandly looks despair in the face. The tragic hero must be great enough to reveal the possibilities of human nature, even though his greatness may mysteriously ruin him. In any case, his actions must be expressive of him himself if he is to present the spectacle of tragic calamity. A. C. Bradley's tragic hero is a man who is no eccentric, but one who possesses to a heightened degree the qualities of an ordinary man, and he says that from tragedy arise hope for man, reverence for man, wonder at the strange world in which man plays his part, and awe at the spectacle of the unknown forces that surround him. The tragic hero is a man such as we are, apparently the master of his fate in his own world, on whom an unknown world mysteriously encroaches. Othello is romantic and imagina-

tive and possessed of a force like a commotion of the elements, is normal in his humanity, and yet sinks into ruin in some sense because of his virtues.

An explanation of this mystery does exist, but no man has been able to grasp it completely. Shakespeare goes farthest of all sages and seers, so far indeed that one is in danger of losing his way in his intricate paths of human nature; but Shakespeare does not go all the way. A. C. Bradley tells us that he is more like Fielding and Scott than he is like Shelley and Wordsworth, that he was broad, disinterested, sympathetic, more gay than grave, not greatly interested in ideas as such, although full of hatred of servility, insincerity, ingratitude, and unforgiving sternness. Only Hamlet, he says, of Shakespeare's characters, could have written the plays. This means that first of all Shakespeare is a seeker after truth, but it is not said that even Shakespeare is perfect.

What we see in Shakespeare is not a special quality of his. It was the primary trait of the English Renaissance of which he was the greatest exponent and ornament. The Renaissance, as a whole and particularly as it manifested itself in England, was a period of history during which men were disposed to accept this world as God's world. Their conception was both formal and religious. The universe seemed an ordered system in which man's place and his duties were ascertainable. It was a world in which something could be done. The philosophy of Aristotle was still in the minds of Renaissance men, and Epicureanism, Stoicism, Scepticism, criticism, and scientific investigation had as yet taken no deep hold. The full teachings of mediaeval Christianity as established by St. Thomas Aquinas and somewhat modified by John Calvin were still the guide of life, so that it comes about that Shakespeare

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is fairly to be regarded as the greatest poet of the Renaissance and, quite generally speaking, the greatest poet of Christianity.

The world that Shakespeare beheld was a world of very broad and liberal features, and this world his transcendent genius proceeded to depict. Shakespeare's world was like a family made up of all sorts and conditions of men. It had ranks and classes, but no idea that any human creature was not a child of God. There were, moreover, few preconceptions as to the nature of man. Virtue was following nature, which was in harmony with the law of God, and vice was departing from it. Vice was a violation of our nature. Passions had their power, but they had no principle in them possessing authority. The authority rested in conscience. Had conscience strength as it had right, it would absolutely govern the world. On these bases then Shakespeare presents us with men as he had seen them and was willing for them to be. They are not types, although they have general as well as special significance. Their actions too have significance rather than typicality. Human action in Shakespeare is not patterned. He does not say, "You will find human life like this"; he says, "These are things you will see. Go out and see for yourselves."

There is little or nothing in Shakespeare we would recognize as modernity—no cynicism, no sophistication, no unwarranted assumption of intellectual superiority. He shows us ordinary men in different walks of life who have had misfortune and wish to change it. Because they wish to change it, they are about to be punished or merely obliterated as if they had never been. He shows us that there is good in ordinary men and women and shows us what that good is. Men are hard and mean or soft and foolish in one way or another or in many ways, but Shake-

Shakespeare reveals them as men. He tells us that there is sadness in being a man, but that it is also a proud thing; and makes clear what the pride of it is until we cannot help feeling it. Even in degradation, if a man is a man in Shakespeare, we know it. Shakespeare seems to plead for single individuals, but he is really pleading for all mankind. He repeats endlessly the story of fame's little day and also the story of how even dishonor and ignominy are relative and temporary. In the range of action he seems to say, "And one to me are shame and fame." Shakespeare tells how in this long journey people get tricked and trapped and mistake fool's gold for pure gold, or how they really find El Dorado—usually too late to open a mine—but always the disappointing journey is a great journey.

We therefore find in Shakespeare, as in life, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the virtuous and the vicious, about which conditions Shakespeare actually believed, as I think you do, that any man may be virtuous or vicious as he chooses.

Let us look at a few of the pictures in the gallery: What Arthur says in *King John* to Hubert to deter him from his cruel deed of blinding the young prince, displays that logic of childhood which puts matters on a strictly personal basis and earnestly balances small things with great.

Arthur.

Have you the heart? When your head did but ache,
I knit my handkercher about your brows,
The best I had, a princess wrought it me,
And I did never ask it you again;
And with my hand at midnight held your head,
And like the watchful minutes to the hour,
Still and anon cheer'd up the heavy time,
Saying, 'What lack you?' and 'Where lies your grief?'
Or, 'What good love may I perform for you?'
Many a poor man's son would have lien still

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And ne'er have spoke a loving word to you;
But you at your sick service had a prince.
Nay, you may think my love was crafty love
And call it cunning: do, an if you will:
If heaven be pleased that you must use me ill,
Why then you must. Will you put out mine eyes?
These eyes that never did nor never shall
So much as frown on you. (IV, i, 41-58)

What the young king Edward V says in *Richard III* about his ideals as king is the very budding of aspiration, expressive of the will to do and the elevation of the mind which characterizes his youthful ambition, although about it all hangs the naïveté of childhood:

Prince. That Julius Caesar was a famous man;
With what his valour did enrich his wit,
His wit set down to make his valour live:
Death makes no conquest of this conqueror;
For now he lives in fame, though not in life.
I'll tell you what, my cousin Buckingham,—
Buck. What, my gracious lord?
Prince. An if I live until I be a man,
I'll win our ancient right in France again,
Or die a soldier, as I lived a king. (III, i, 84-93)

Romeo's outburst in sonnet-form when he beholds Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* is an ultimate and convincing testimony to the existence among human beings of possibilities of love and of love at first sight, capable of being denied only by those unhappy spirits who have never loved at all:

Rom. (To a Servingman) What lady is that, which doth enrich
the hand
Of yonder knight?
Serv. I know not, sir.
Rom. O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear;
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,
As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.
The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,

And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.
Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

(I, v, 43-55)

The words of Hermione under accusation in *The Winter's Tale* are the words of self-respecting matrons—mothers and wives—who in the allotment of the woes of human life have as a class perhaps the largest share of troubles and responsibilities:

Herm. Since what I am to say must be but that
Which contradicts my accusation and
The testimony on my part no other
But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me
To say 'not guilty': mine integrity
Being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it,
Be so received. But thus: if powers divine
Behold our human actions, as they do,
I doubt not then but innocence shall make
False accusation blush and tyranny
Tremble at patience. You, my lord, best know,
Who least will seem to do so, my past life
Hath been as continent, as chaste, as true,
As I am now unhappy; which is more
Than history can pattern, though devised
And play'd to take spectators. For behold me
A fellow of the royal bed, which owe
A moiety to the throne, a great king's daughter,
The mother to a hopeful prince, here standing
To prate and talk for life and honour 'fore
Who please to come and hear. For life, I prize it
As I weigh grief, which I would spare: for honour,
'Tis a derivative from me to mine,
And only that I stand for. (III, ii, 23-46)

There are professional soldiers still in the world, men whose trade has made them at once cynical and utterly faithful. Such is Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Eno. Now he'll outstare the lightning. To be furious,
Is to be frightened out of fear; and in that mood
The dove will peck the estridge; and I see still,
A diminution in our captain's brain

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Restores his heart: when valour preys on reason,
It eats the sword it fights with. I will seek
Some way to leave him. (III, xiii, 194-201)

It is the disillusioned soldier who speaks, but Enobarbus is loyal at heart, and when he has committed his act of desertion his conscience breaks his heart:

Eno. O sovereign mistress of true melancholy,
The poisonous damp of night disponge upon me,
That life, a very rebel to my will,
May hang no longer on me: throw my heart
Against the flint and hardness of my fault;
Which, being dried with grief, will break to powder,
And finish all foul thoughts. O Antony,
Nobler than my revolt is infamous,
Forgive me in thine own particular;
But let the world rank me in register
A master-leaver and a fugitive. (IV, ix, 11-22)

Mistress Quickly is a silly old woman, but we leave her with the impression that silly old women have lived and have a right to live:

Pist. No; for my manly heart doth yearn.
Bardolph, be blithe; Nym, rouse thy vaunting veins:
Boy, bristle thy courage up; for Falstaff he is dead,
And we must yearn therefore.

Bard. Would I were with him, wheresome'er he is, either in heaven or in hell!

Host. Nay, sure he's not in hell: he's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. A' made a finer end and went away an it had been any christom child; a' parted even just between twelve and one, even at the turning o' the tide: for after I saw him fumble with the sheets and play with flowers and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and a' babbled of green fields. 'How now, Sir John!' quoth I: 'what, man! be o' good cheer.' So a' cried out 'God, God, God!' three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him a' should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So a' bade me lay more clothes on his feet: I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone; then I felt to his knees, and they were as cold as any stone, and so upward and upward, and all was as cold as any stone. *Henry V*, (II, iii, 2-28)

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It was a dull day at the Boar's-Head Tavern. Sir John Falstaff, who feels the dullness deeply, finds an outlet for his well known exuberance only in a gratuitous attack on poor befuddled Bardolph:

- Fal.* Bardolph, am I not fallen away vilely since this last action? do I not bate? do I not dwindle? Why, my skin hangs about me like an old lady's loose gown; I am withered like an old applejohn. Well, I'll repent, and that suddenly, while I am in some liking; I shall be out of heart shortly, and then I shall have no strength to repent. An I have not forgotten what the inside of a church is made of, I am a peppercorn, a brewer's horse: the inside of a church! Company, villainous company, hath been the spoil of me.
- Bard.* Sir John, you are so fretful, you cannot live long.
- Fal.* Why, there it is: come sing me a bawdy song; make me merry. I was as virtuously given as a gentleman need to be; virtuous enough; swore little; diced not above seven times a week; . . . paid money that I borrowed, three or four times; lived well and in good compass: and now I live out of all order, out of all compass.
- Bard.* Why, you are so fat, Sir John, that you must needs be out of all compass, out of all reasonable compass, Sir John.
- Fal.* Do thou amend thy face, and I'll amend my life: thou art our admiral, thou bearest the lantern in the poop, but 'tis in the nose of thee; thou art the Knight of the Burning Lamp.
- Bard.* Why, Sir John, my face does you no harm.
- Fal.* No, I'll be sworn; I made as good use of it as many a man doth of a Death's-head or a memento mori: I never see thy face but I think upon hell-fire and Dives that lived in purple; for there he is in his robes, burning, burning. (*1 Henry IV*, III, iii, 1-36)

Shakespeare has placed in the gallery of the world's fiction the picture of an out-and-out rogue. After this rogue has sung, "When daffodils begin to peer," he describes himself and tells his name.

My traffic is sheets; when the kite builds, look to lesser linen. My father named me Autolycus; who being, as I am, littered under Mercury, was likewise a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles. With die and drab I purchased this caparison, and my revenue is the silly cheat. Gallows and knock are too powerful on the highway: beating and hanging are terrors to me: for the life to come, I sleep out the thought of it. (*The Winter's Tale*, IV, iii, 23-31)

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These passages are illustrative of Shakespeare's illimitable sympathies with men. I remember that they were favorites of Stockton Axson's. They seem to reflect for us here tonight, not only the catholicity of Shakespeare's world, but the winning humor and generous spirit of our former friend and associate.

It is obvious then that Shakespeare presents us with all sorts and conditions of men and that they are real men. There is also another thought related to this that in this first lecture in the series I need to ask you to consider. It concerns the normality of Shakespeare's ethical thought and has been given admirable expression by Coleridge. With a paragraph from his *Lectures on Shakespeare* I shall close:

Keeping at all times in the high road of life. Shakespeare has no innocent adulteries, no interesting incests, no virtuous vice;—he never renders that amiable which religion and reason alike teach us to detest, or clothes impurity in the garb of virtue, like Beaumont and Fletcher, the Kotzebues of the day. Shakespeare's fathers are roused by ingratitude, his husbands stung by unfaithfulness; in him, in short, the affections are wounded in those points in which all may, nay, must, feel. Let the morality of Shakespeare be contrasted with that of the writers of his own, or the succeeding, age, or of those of the present day, who boast their superiority in this respect. No one can dispute that the result of such a comparison is altogether in favour of Shakespeare;—even the letters of women of high rank in his age were often coarser than his writings. If he occasionally disgusts a keen sense of delicacy, he never injures the mind; he neither excites, nor flatters, passion, in order to degrade the subject of it; he does not use the faulty thing for a faulty purpose, nor carries on warfare against virtue, by causing wickedness to appear as no wickedness, through the medium of a morbid sympathy with the unfortunate. In Shakespeare vice never walks as in twilight; nothing is purposely out of its place;—he inverts not the order of nature and propriety,—does not make every magistrate a drunkard or glutton, nor every poor man meek, humane, and temperate; he has no benevolent butchers, nor any sentimental rat-catchers.